'You can be me when I'm gone'
Mixed media in *Sandman: Overture*

DC Vertigo's *Sandman* series is best remembered as Neil Gaiman's *magnum opus*: an epic maxi-series that ran for 75 episodes across 7 years and launched DC's Vertigo imprint. Its use of mythological content and literary references allowed *Sandman* to claim its place as a canonised graphic novel (despite not actually being a graphic novel at all!) and Gaiman's authorship and authority dominate the text and epitomise Michel Foucault's author function.

But *Sandman* also draws heavily on mixed media and artistic variation and these aspects are less often discussed. Far from supporting a singular author function, *Sandman*'s visual style is multiple and varied. But despite this, in paratexts and intertexts the artistic contributions are frequently subsumed into Gaiman's authorship. However, a closer reading demonstrates that in fact *Sandman*'s mixed media visuals and eclectic art destabilises its singular authorship and enacts the particular status struggles of comics as a collaborative medium struggling against the literary graphic novel branding.

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DC's Vertigo imprint contributed heavily to the mainstream cultural revaluation of comics as graphic novels. Its use of the graphic novel format to collect stories into distinct arcs, often bookended by short epilogues and prologues, prompts Maaheen Ahmed (69) to claim that QUOTE 'The difference between these issues and the chapters in a novel is small'. Alongside a bookish structure, *Sandman* also offers weighty literary content: adapting multiple religious mythologies and literary allusions (for example, Shakespeare and Chaucer). It consistently sold 100,000 copies per issue during its run and won Gaiman four Eisner awards and, somewhat controversially, the 1991 World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction for the MSND issue (#19). So in terms of both economic capital and cultural capital (or prestige) (to borrow Pierre Bordieu's framework as used in Bart Beaty and Ben Woo's *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time*) it has been successful by mobilising its status as a literary popular work.

Following on from Alan Moore's work on *Watchmen* and *Swamp Thing, Sandman* is thus considered emblematic of the 'British Invasion', which much of the DC Vertigo imprint was built on. This change was described by DC editor Karen Berger as 'totally writer-led' and she compares the resulting comics to prose fiction with a new 'respectability'.

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As well as all this critical distance, Vertigo had an aesthetic distance: no DC bullet logo appeared on the cover and *Sandman*'s covers in particular were conceptual and often surreal – and didn't feature its lead character. Later collected editions further emphasise literary status: for example the 'Absolute Sandman' and the 'Sandman Omnibus editions'. Their aesthetic is self-consciously bibliophilic, with leather-like covers in black and red.

SLIDE: Gaiman criticism

The vast majority of *Sandman* scholarship to date has also honed in on the series' literary qualities, such as Gaiman's use of allusion, metaphor and overwriting. He appears second on the 2015 MLA comics citations database used by Beaty and Woo, and entire issues of academic journals and many edited collections have now focused on his work, as you can see. Within these, there are multiple analyses of *Sandma*n with respect to Joseph Campbell's hero archetype (Rauch and Rawlik); Irish lore and legend (Alexander); and as exemplary of English Romanticism (Katsiadas). It is not unusual for these scholars to go beyond the text to parallel Gaiman and his protagonist and argue that we can read both as Romantic authors (SiC 6 (1) p61-84) qt. p61.

In Imagetext journal Clay Smith also argues that we can read Gaiman as his protagonist – but with more negative consequences. Smith points out the dominance of Gaiman's author function and the way it is rearticulated and emphasised in interviews with his collaborators and artists. He cites colorist Daniel Vozzo as saying: QUOTE "If he [Gaiman] doesn't agree with or like something, he'll let you know it, which is fine. And then you change it because he is the man." (McCabe 190). Smith also draws attention to the use of Gaiman's name as owner and validator of anthologies such as *The Sandman: Book of Dreams*, arguing that QUOTE 'his author(ity) manifests itself throughout the entire work in implicit and explicit ways' (Smith)

SLIDE: Gaiman author function

So what does it mean to be an author? Foucault's discussion of the meanings attached to this label can be broken down into these four parts and we can see that Gaiman fits all of them. His style is consistent across all the media he works in: strongly narrated and generally rewriting mythology, fairytale and literature and devising fantasy worlds. His ideology too remains similar: employing and extolling the power of fantasy, and drawing on notions of creativity, heroism and questing. He himself most certainly exists as a clearly recognizable (and very bookish!) figure. The standard or quality of his work is also consistently erudite: whether it's children's literature or non-fiction his writing is literary and reflective in tone.

Smith says that Gaiman's constant use of citations, quotations and references to other authors QUOTE 'demonstrate[s] his command of *authors/others* – specifically by incorporating them into the body of his work and (re)authoring them.' The way in which Gaiman flags up his usage of literary figures and quotations asserts his ownership. To borrow Gaiman's own image from *Sandman,* he himself becomes the 'vortex' of narrativity from which his readers cannot (and do not want to) escape.

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While I agree with Smith's observations about Gaiman's absorption of other writers, I think the conclusion is more complicated than he suggests. I argue in my book (2014: 158) that Gaiman's overwriting of characters is an act of gothic absorption that also foregrounds the artificial nature of the author function and concepts of literary ownership. For example the reuse of characters such as Cain and Abel, who were first biblical characters, then hosts of the *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets* DC anthologies, then featured in Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*, and then incorporated by Gaiman into *Sandman* as characters in The Dreaming. Do these characters belong to the writers who first created them and worked on the 1970s DC anthologies, or has Alan Moore's rewriting now absorbed them into his *oeuvre*, or Gaiman's into his? This reuse even extends to the reprinting of specific pages, as in this central example – do these extracts then remain part of their original appearance, or become part of the later narrative, particularly if we consider that their meaning has been altered by being absorbed? Such questions exemplify Foucault's interrogation of the author function as a restrictive category that represents just one way of classifying texts and should be challenged.

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It is particularly dangerous when it comes to comics, and critics such as *Smith, Beaty and Woo all draw attention to the way in which comics criticism frequently overlooks the artist*. It is this argument that I want to extend today by exploring *Sandman*'s visual elements, which are often overlooked. After demonstrating how the comic's art foregrounds and problematizes the author function, I then want to push this a step further and concluding by arguing that *Sandman*'s themes and aesthetic actually demonstrate what Christopher Pizzino names 'autoclasm' – an enactment of the status struggles against the graphic novel label that comics continue to undergo.

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Dave McKean's unique and memorable collage covers are the most visible art associated with *Sandman.* They dominate over the title's logo, which on the Sandman Overture cover shown here is 'almost blown off the [page]'. They've been used to provide legitimation for Sandman spin-offs such as *The Dreaming*

and have also been collected and memorialised in multiple editions as shown here.

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Although McKean's art is varied in itself, there were also numerous artists working on the *Sandman* stories – and not just as guest appearances, a lot of these artists drew, inked or coloured multiple issues or entire arcs. This matched the diversity of the comic's content and raised its critical profile still further. While McKean did all the covers and Todd Klein was letterer throughout, the artistic team varied for each story arc, and even each issue. There were over 40 artists on the original run, and although it goes against the objective of this paper, for reasons of time I won't name them all – but I do have a complete list so please do ask if you'd like to see me test my lung capacity by reeling them all off ☺

Sam Kieth, Mike Dringenberg, Jill Thompson, Shawn McManus, Marc Hempel, Michael Zulli, Malcolm Jones III, Chris Bachalo, Steve Parkhouse, Robbie Busch, Kelley Jones, Charles Vess, Colleen Doran, Steve Oliff, Matt Wagner, Dick Giordano, George Pratt, P. Craig Russell, Danny Vozzo, Shawn McManus, Bryan Talbot, Stan Woch, John Watkiss, Duncan Eagleson, Kent Williams, Mark Buckingham, Vince Locke, Lovern Kindzierski/Digital Chameleon, Michael Allred, Gary Amaro, Tony Harris, Steve Leialoha, Shea Anton Pensa, Alec Stevens, John Watkiss, Marc Hempel, Richard Case, D'Israeli, Teddy Kristiansen, Glyn Dillon, Dean Ormston, Kevin Nowlan and John Muth.

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What seems significant is that these artists were deliberately selected for their very different characteristics, for example Gaiman says of Marc Hempel, whose style is quite art deco and angular and shown on the left here, QUOTE 'I wanted a sense of form. I wanted a sense of everything reducing to light and shadow, of everything reducing to simple shape.' (McCabe p6). Danny Vozzo's flat and bold colours emphasise this. By contrast, Michael Zulli's coloured pencils for *The Wake* have no inked lines and create an ethereal look for this story arc.

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Of course with multiple names attached the author function becomes, quite paradoxically, both foregrounded and undermined, in a way that seems particular to comics, where long-running series will publicise a particular writer or artist's run while also seeking to maintain narrative coherence. In *Sandman*, although each artist has a distinct style, they also play with numerous influences and techniques that often take them beyond their own era. For example, Kelley Jones used styles including 19th c. Japanese woodcuts and Ancient Egyptian tomb

paintings as well as drawing on the work of Aubrey Beardsley and August Doré in his work on *Seasons of Mist*. (Clay Smith).

Standard and reception also becomes quite varied, most obviously evidenced by the reception of TKO. Hempel's style and Vozzo's colouring initially received mixed reactions from readers perhaps because the monthly publishing schedule allowed them time to forget and thus some found it 'artificial' and 'distancing'. However Gaiman claims that QUOTE 'With *The Kindly Ones* story collected in a book, you're in there and it may be distancing for the first couple of pages but as it goes on, you are in *that world*.' P6. Again the collected, more book-like format is cited as essential to the artwork's success (and vice versa)

SLIDE Mckean
Returning to the McKean covers, these have been used as an explicit identifying marker for Sandman, just as the author function operates. The early covers followed a similar arrangement, large-scale box sculptures with the shelves down the side being inspired by the film poster for Peter Greenaway's *The Belly of an Architect*. The first eight covers were conceived as a kind of portrait gallery that included images of David Bowie (as Lucifer), Bauhaus singer Peter Murphy (as the Sandman), Scott Free, Dr Dee, and some of McKean's friends. As you can see from the photographs of the originals, they are not only mixed media but of a large scale and including competing themes and conflicting images.

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However, after the first arc and as the series developed, the covers became even more varied. McKean claims he had no plan and basically did whatever style he fancied while responding to Gaiman's story outlines. Paintings or photographs would be scanned and made into prints, to which mixed media elements such as tissue and paint and details were added, creating collages. McKean also often used thick varnish to add living things (embedded bits of root, soil, bark).
He also used different methods of manipulation: Photoshop came into play in later covers, around the Worlds' End time, as he purchased a Mac Quadra in 1995.

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There are no consistent themes or strategies here. Even complexity or collage or manipulation are not constant elements. Some covers were simply posed photographs *(as on the left here, part of the Fables and Reflections arc 'Convergence', which used hand-made flat masks).* Others are simple pen and ink drawings, this one inspired by Milton Glaser's work on the Signet Shakespeare editions.

So we can see that diversity and eclecticism are used as the defining trait of Sandman's art where it problematizes the author function.

This brings me to *Sandman Overture*.

SLIDE - Overture

After Sandman ended in 1996 a selection of spin-off series and one-shots were subsequently produced, none written by Gaiman except the *Endless Nights* collection which dealt with the lives of his other deities. Then in 2013, nearly 25 years after the series first began, Gaiman returned to the title with *Sandman: Overture*. Straight away, it's obvious that the hardcover format, glossy pages and the language used about this text elevate it to literary status: *Sandman: Zero* was rejected as a potential title in favour of *Overture*, which of course carries connotations of elitism, opera and so forth. The introduction and other paratextual materials in this collected edition are entitled 'Composing and performing', again reinforcing the metaphor.

However, rather than a pantheon of artists, this six-issue mini series is written by Gaiman with art only by JH Williams 3rd and colour by Dave Stewart.

Stewart has won nine Eisner awards for his work on titles for DC and Dark Horse and has also coloured high-profile covers including the current *Walking Dead* run, and the Tim Sale art used in the TV show *Heroes*. Williams' work on *Starman*, *Promethea* and *Batwoman* has also brought him critical acclaim. His varied and experimental style continues in *Sandman: Overture* and, I would argue, is used to signal connections with the previous series and to reinforce its literary weight while sustaining its variety. The number of covers released for the miniseries also emphasises this notion – issue #1 had 9 different covers, shown here (the rest had around 6 or 7, most drawn or recoloured by Williams with one for each issue by McKean, again looing back to the original series).

These artists' holistic and organic artistic processes extend and develop *Sandman*'s mixed media approach and overall aesthetic of diversity, and continue to problematize the author function in the same manner as the multiple artists who worked on the original *Sandman*. In fact, the visibility of Overture's two artists and the dominance of its aesthetic over narrative might even be taking this a step further to reveal Gaiman's loosening control on the series. Gaiman was famed for providing thumbnail page layouts and detailed panel descriptions for the original series, but it seems unlikely he did this for the Overture pages that follow and in fact Williams describes his artistic process as an organic and fluid one, where choices of style come QUOTE 'from my gut' rather than being pre-set and agreed.

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A quick skip through (and going much faster than these pages honestly deserve) gives us a wide range of different styles and techniques.

The opening pages provide images and layouts, which signal the content as fantastical, but also weighty and literary, as you can see here (where not just the image of the book, but also the sheer weight of narration on the left hand side both dominate the page).

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But by the close of the arc this has given way to dizzying double-page spreads that play with the use of perspective as befits the cosmic level of this story. With this single image we have monochrome sections, flat coloured parts, and photo-real imagery, all combined.

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It also, as we might expect, plays with the conventions of the medium, e.g. using panel borders to indicate a particular character's viewpoint on the story, as in these pages on the left here which are narrated by a dream character named 'George Portcullis'. Within this we see characteristic play of the medium, for example the switch to what I would call the embodied viewpoint of the Corinthian character in the second panel of the second page (bottom left), as we look out through his teeth/eyes.

Borders and layout are also matched to the theme of the page – so the plant-based characters that open the narrative (here on the top right) are enclosed with organic-looking lines: there are no straight lines on this page aside from the narrative boxes.

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Later pages contain a similar sense of unification of form/content, for example this page where the flower motif provides the panel borders. Again, as befits the character Delirium's shaky grasp on reality, there are no right angles or straight lines.

Dave Stewart's comments on colour included in the Deluxe Edition of Overture relate specifically to this page, as when asked about his favourite colour he responds Q 'They're all my babies. How can I choose?' But he continues that he privileges colour combos over original colours Q 'Certain rusty red, yellow green, and mustard yellow hues in combination make me pretty happy'. So even the

paratexts about this comic emphasise its multiplicity – Stewart cannot choose one colour, just as *Sandman*'s art cannot be singular!

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Similarly in Chapter 5, Night's realm is not just appropriately coloured but the layout of the page as a whole reinforces the flowing, seductive air. Panels blossom from a central shape that seems quite sexually resonant, and organic, as they align with the lines of Night's body, for example her arm in the bottom right quadrant. *Roads and pathways also provide borders as in the top right. The whole is both organic and surreal, as the flat pink colours used for borders and the character herself offer no sense of realism.*

Williams describes his process as equally organic and holistic, saying his choice of style comes 'from my gut' and that he knows when a page is finished Q 'When it's at the point that if I add anything more it will be overwrought, becoming ruined and a drag.' – in a sense, working back from the whole to reach this conclusion. This organic approach recalls McKean's comments about producing the original covers 'with no real plan' and simply responding to Gaiman's plot points.

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Later pages also disrupt our expectations of normality and reality, for example by requiring us to change reading direction. This forces us to interact with the book physically by turning it in our hands to continue reading, as in these pages – a dizzying experience but one that simultaneously reminds us of the object we are holding (and of course affects those non-bibliophilic readers who might have bought a digital copy).

The double page on the right also reminds us of the object through its warped diamond-shaped panels, which again play with perspective and expectations of a two-dimensional square border.

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At other points, the medium again reminds us of its presence, for example by using what I call 'false panels' here, laid over a single page image and allowing for the repetition of characters as they move between instances – often called the 'De Luca' effect.

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These are not new strategies.
But other elements <u>are</u> brand new: letterer Todd Klein produced over fifty different character and caption styles for *Overture*, using non-standard lettering for all of the Sandman pantheon whose typeface and speech balloon tails are all

different. This is of course a continuation of the technique Klein used in the original *Sandman*, where Morpheus's speech always appeared black. Back then this was achieved by hand: the speech was hand-lettered, printed in negative, cut out by hand, and then pasted over the artwork. For *Overture* Klein achieved this digitally, which also allowed him to merge the text and art still further by using translucent lettering and transparent balloons where it suited the story.

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The merging of text and image is also apparent in the title pages to each chapter, which incorporate these labels into the artwork. Again, this uses a range of different styles and media to suit the mood, for example the coloured pencils and lack of inks used in Chapter 4 here to convey the City of the Stars – 'a city made of light', which led Williams to decide not to use any black whatsoever.

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These contrasting styles extend out to rest of comic – for example as in this double page from issue 4, which brings together a range of contrasting styles and techniques. As Stewart comments Q 'Some of the stuff we're doing requires a new technical approach.'

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Critic Andy Khouri also draws attention to this, saying: Q 'There's some stuff that's hand-painted, some stuff done in washes, some stuff that's only pencil that's been coloured.'

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Finally, the mighty gateway pages (creating a 4-page spread) that appear at the beginning and end of the mini-series.

Within this spread we can also see the contrasting styles of different Sandmen, some of which specifically echo the original series (such as the full moon head), although the majority are utterly new! Perspective is also used to emphasise this (2-dimensional character at centre-left and another towards the top right). Scale is also used – the hands of a giant *Sandman* character are shown on the right hand side. Visibility and colour also play a role, for example through the translucent black ghost-like shape to the centre right and the bursts of flame which break up the many shades of blue used on this page.

The gateway pages again bring in haptic issues as we literally expand the space of the page – just as the Sandman himself has been expanded and multiplied.

The opulent and varied aesthetic and the gatefold device scream quality and innovation. Critics hailed *Overture* as 'stunning', 'amazing' and 'well written' (Bailey) and 'truly beautiful'. But there was also criticism: as reviewer Dan Nadel argues that the elaborate art Q 'stifles actual engagement' and that Gaiman's level of control Q 'actually works against his premise.' Here Nadel echoes Clay Smith by finding both Gaiman's authority and the opulent art problematic.

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With this in mind, and rather than concluding with a recap, I'd like to end by reframing my observations in terms of some recent work that has been done on comics and legitimation and offer a suggestion for further exploration.

Jean-Paul Gabbiliet and Paul Lopes have done significant work on the historical legitimation of comics. Gabilliet's cultural history looks at the structuring social and economic relationships that have defined the development of comics publishing.
He considers both internal and external types of consecration and how these contribute to the visibility, recognition, and cultural legitimacy of comics.
In summarising, he points out that while the graphic novel format has shifted comics towards the field of adult culture, the inertia of the monthly market has simultaneously trapped the medium as part of adolescent culture. I find this particularly interesting in the context of Charles Hatfield's work on narrative tensions and my own work that identifies similar internal contradictions shared between comics and the Gothic.

David Ball's work on Chris Ware's comics also notes a similar technique: that he names 'comics against themselves' – the tendency to bring in high-minded literary themes while simultaneously undoing them (Pizzino 68).
[*I personally understand this as the type of process we see in shows like South Park where an intellectual point is paired with a gross analogy*].
Again, a contradictory impulse seems present in the medium. The tendency of comics to be self-referential is also noted by Esther Szep in an article entitled 'Metacomics' in which she argues that comics are, first and foremost, about being comics and argues for them to be defined as a rhetorical mode.

Most recently, Christopher Pizzino's book *Arresting Development* seeks to develop this body of criticism by using the notion of legitimation as a tool to read the comics page. He defines and argues for a process called 'autoclasm' (or 'self-breaking') – a split energy that articulates comics' problems in comics-specific terms on the page.

Essentially Pizzino argues that the 'coming of age' *bildungsroman* narrative continually applied to comics in the mainstream media is a fiction. The fact that this same 'news' is still being reported year after year is indicative of what remains as an ongoing struggle for legitimation. This is also apparent in comics paratexts and scholarship, where critics often engage in doublethink by positioning a 'great' comic as the exception to the rule and using the language of cinema or prose or comparisons to these to analyse them (32) - just as Karen Berger did in the quote earlier discussing Alan Moore.

Pizzino argues that the 'signs of these struggles can be read on the comics page' (2), which demonstrate a split energy that articulates comics' status problems. He offers four case studies, that include reading TDKR through the language of the comics code
(particularly the accusations of Frederic Wertham which are re-voiced through its psychiatrist figure)

and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* as articulating the disruptive pleasure that comics offer.

His reading of Charles Burns' Black Hole demonstrates the abjection and exclusion that comics fans can feel; and Hernandez Bros' Love and Rockets reframes the violence directed at comics by articulating trauma and suffering on many different levels. He also gives multiple other throwaway examples, such as Hill and Rodriguez's Locke and Key, in which parents forget the actions they took as children, as representative of the pressure on the comic reader to eventually forget and throwaway these childish things.

Using this model I'd suggest that *Sandman*'s incorporation of literary references can be read as an example of autoclasm. Gaiman thus performs the literary or intertextual play of high-low culture, representing comics' ongoing struggles with the graphic novel label and himself as an author.

Also fitting Pizzino's model, this is done via a method that is typically 'of comics' – by using retroactive continuity, but pushed to the nth degree. So Gaiman overwrites other literary texts and historical events (such as Shakespeare's plays, or a global sleeping sickness) (*that did indeed appear between 1915 and 1926*), explaining them away as a result of his narrative. In addition, his combination of diverse mythologies and literatures demonstrates the same type of cross-fertilisation that the American comics have created (where multiple characters inhabit the same universe).

Finally, the dramatically varied art produced by his collaborators also enacts the multiplicity of comics art more generally, where pencillers, inkers, colourists and letterers collaborate on a single text. This is even sustained within the work of singular, named artists such as McKean, Stewart or Williams through their use of collage and mixed methods.

So I hope that this analysis of *Sandman* has not only drawn attention to the role of its artists and their use of mixed media to create a sense of eclectic literariness, but also suggested a possible interpretation of this series as an example of autoclasm. In *Sandman* both the words and art create worth and quality, and also demonstrate the particular status struggle of the collaborative comics medium against the graphic novel label.